

White Lie

THIS COMING Wednesday, the Supreme Court of Israel will consider an application by a group of Israeli citizens to compel the Interior Ministry to register them as belonging to the "Israeli nation".

Odd? Indeed.

The Israeli Interior Ministry recognizes 126 nations, but not the Israeli nation. An Israeli citizen can be registered as belonging to the Assyrian, the Tatar or the Circassian nation. But the Israeli nation? Sorry, no such thing.

According to the official doctrine, the State of Israel cannot recognize an "Israeli" nation because it is the state of the "Jewish" nation. In other words, it belongs to the Jews of Brooklyn, Budapest and Buenos Aires, even though these consider themselves as belonging to the American, Hungarian or Argentine nations.

Messy? Indeed.

THIS MESS started 113 years ago, when the Viennese Journalist Theodor Herzl wrote his book "The State of the Jews". (That's the true translation. The generally used name "The Jewish State" is false and means something else.) For this purpose he had to perform an acrobatic exercise. One can say that he used a white lie.

Modern Zionism was born as a direct response to modern anti-Semitism. Not by accident, the term "Zionismus" came into being some 20 years after the term "Antisemitismus" was invented in Germany. They are twins.

In Europe and the Americas another modern term was flourishing: Nationalism. Peoples which had been living together for centuries under dynasties of Emperors and Kings wanted to belong to nation-states of their own. In Argentina, the USA, France and other countries, "national" revolutions took place. The idea infected almost all peoples, big, small and tiny, from Peru to Lithuania, from Colombia to Serbia. They felt a need to belong to the place and the people where they lived and died.

All these national movements were necessarily anti-Semitic, some more, some less, because the very existence of the Jewish Diaspora ran counter to their basic perceptions. A Diaspora without a homeland, dispersed over dozens of countries, could not be reconciled with the idea of a homeland-rooted nation seeking uniformity.

Herzl understood that the new reality was inherently dangerous for the Jews. In the beginning he cherished the idea of complete assimilation: all the Jews would be baptized and disappear in the new nations. As a professional writer for the theater, he even devised the scenario: all Viennese Jews would march together to St. Stephen's cathedral and be baptized *en masse*.

When he realized that this scenario was a bit far-fetched, Herzl passed from the idea of individual assimilation to what may be called collective assimilation: if there is no place for the Jews in the new

nations, then they should define themselves as a nation like all the others, rooted in a homeland of their own and living in a state of their own. This idea was called Zionism.

BUT THERE was a problem: a Jewish nation did not exist. The Jews were not a nation but a religious-ethnic community.

A nation exists on one level of human society, a religious-ethnic community on another. A "nation" is an entity living together in one country with a common political will. A "community" is a religious entity based on a common faith, which can live in different countries. A German, for example, can be Catholic or Protestant; a Catholic can be German or French.

These two types of entity have two different means of survival, much as different species in nature. When a lion is in danger, it fights, it attacks. For that purpose, nature has equipped it with teeth and claws. When a gazelle is in danger, it runs. Nature has given it quick legs. Every method is good, if it is effective. (If it were not effective, the species would not have survived to this day.)

When a nation is in danger, it stands and fights. When a religious community is in danger, it moves elsewhere. The Jews, more than any others, have perfected the art of escape. Even after the horrors of the Holocaust, the Jewish Diaspora has survived and now, two generations later, it is again flourishing.

IN ORDER to invent a Jewish nation, Herzl had to ignore this difference. He pretended that the Jewish ethnic-religious community was also a Jewish nation. In other words: contrary to all other peoples, the Jews were both a nation and a religious community; as far as Jews were concerned, the two were the same. The nation was a religion, the religion was a nation.

This was the "white lie". There was no other way: without it, Zionism could not have come into being. The new movement took the Star of David from the synagogue, the candlestick from the Temple, the blue-and-white flag from the prayer shawl. The holy land became a homeland. Zionism filled the religious symbols with secular, national content.

The first to detect the falsification were the Orthodox Rabbis. Almost all of them damned Herzl and his Zionism in no uncertain terms. The most extreme was the Rabbi of Lubavitch, who accused Herzl of destroying Judaism. The Jews, he wrote, are united by their adherence to God's commandments. Doctor Herzl wants to supplant this God-given bond with secular nationalism.

When Herzl originated the Zionist idea, he did not intend to found the "State of the Jews" in Palestine, but in Argentina. Even when writing his book, he devoted to the country only a few lines, under the headline "Palestine or Argentina?" However, the movement he created compelled him to divert his endeavors to the

Land of Israel, and so the state came into being here.

When the State of Israel was founded and the Zionist dream realized, there was no further need for the "white lie". After the building was finished, the scaffolding should have been removed. A real Israeli nation had come into being, there was no further need for an imaginary one.

THESE DAYS Israel's largest newspaper, Yediot Aharonot, is running a TV ad showing selected past issues. The day the State of Israel was founded, the giant headline announced: "Hebrew State!"

"Hebrew", not "Jewish". And not by accident: at that time, the term "Jewish state" sounded decidedly strange. In the preceding years, people in this country had got used to making a clear distinction between "Jewish" and "Hebrew", between matters that belonged to the Diaspora and those belonging to this country: Jewish Diaspora, Jewish language (Yiddish), Jewish Stetl, Jewish religion, Jewish tradition - but Hebrew language, Hebrew agriculture, Hebrew industries, Hebrew underground organizations, Hebrew policemen.

If so, why do the words "Jewish state" appear in our Declaration of Independence? There was a simple reason for that: the UN had adopted a resolution to partition the country between an "Arab state" and a "Jewish state". That was the legal basis of the new state. The declaration, which was drafted in haste, said therefore that we were establishing "the Jewish state (according to the UN resolution), namely the State of Israel".

The building was finished, but the scaffolding was not taken down. On the contrary: it became the most important part of the building and dominates its facade.

LIKE MOST of us at the time, David Ben-Gurion believed that Zionism had supplanted religion and that religion had become redundant. He was quite sure that it would shrivel and disappear by itself in the new secular state. He decided that we could afford to dispense with the military service of Yeshiva bochers (Talmud school students), believing that their number would dwindle from a few hundred to almost none. The same thought caused him to allow religious schools to continue in existence. Like Herzl, who promised to "keep our Rabbis in the synagogues and our army officers in the barracks", Ben-Gurion was certain that the state would be entirely secular.

When Herzl wrote of the "state of the Jews" he did not dream that the Jewish Diaspora would continue to exist. In his view, only the citizens of the new state would henceforth be called "Jews", all other Jews in the world would assimilate in their various nations and disappear from view.

BUT THE "white lie" of Herzl had results he did not dream of, as did the compromises of Ben-Gurion.

Religion did not wither away in Israel, but on the contrary: it is gaining control of the state. The government of Israel does not speak of the nation-state of the Israelis who live here, but of the "nation-state of the Jews" - a state that belongs to the Jews all over the world, most of whom belong to other nations.

The religious schools are eating up the general education system and are going to overpower it, if we don't become aware of the danger and assert our Israeli essence. Voting rights are about to be accorded to Israelis residing abroad, and this is a step towards giving the vote to all Jews around the world. And, most important: the ugly weeds growing in the national-religious field - the fanatical settlers - are pushing the state in a direction that may lead to its destruction.

TO SAFEGUARD the future of Israel one has to start by removing the scaffolding from the building. In other words: burying the "white lie" of religion-equals-nation. The Israeli nation has to be recognized as the basis of the state.

If this principle is accepted, what will the future shape of Israel - within the Green Line - be like?

There are two possible models, and many variations between them.

Model A: the multi-national one. Almost all the citizens of Israel belong to one of two nations: the majority belongs to the Hebrew nation and a minority to the Palestinian-Arab nation. Each nation will enjoy autonomy in certain areas, such as culture, education and religion. Autonomy will not be territorial, but cultural (as Vladimie Ze'ev Jabotinsky proposed a hundred years ago for Czarist Russia). All will be united by Israeli citizenship and loyalty to the state. The inbuilt discrimination of the Arab minority will become a thing of the past, as well as the "demographic demon".

Model B: the American one. The American nation is composed of all US citizens, and all US citizens constitute the American nation. An immigrant from Jamaica who acquires US citizenship automatically becomes a member of the American nation, an heir to George Washington and Abe Lincoln. All learn at school the same core program and the same history.

Which of the two models is preferable? In my view, Model B is much better. But it would depend on a dialogue between the Hebrew majority and the Arab minority. In the end, the Arab citizens will have to decide whether they prefer the status of equal partners in a general Israeli nation, or the status of a recognized, autonomous national minority in a state that acknowledges and cherishes their separate culture, side by side with the culture of the majority.

In four days, the Supreme Court will decide whether it is prepared to take the first step in this historic march.